

Using Translated First Language Literature in the Second Language Classroom

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Introduction

Finding appropriate literature to teach in the second language (L2) classroom has always been a major challenge. Selected texts should not be too long, not too linguistically and conceptually complex, not too distant from the world knowledge of the student, and should generate student interest. Due to these stringent requirements, few teachers use literature in the English language classroom. In this short paper I argue for the use of a certain type of literature, translated first language literature, and offer practical methods on how to teach it.

Value of Teaching Literature

There are five reasons commonly given for teaching literature in the L2 classroom:

1. It helps students understand and appreciate cultures and beliefs different from their own. "By constructing with the literary text a reality different from that of texts of information, students are given access to a world of attitudes, and values, collective imaginings and historical frames of reference that constitute the memory of a people or speech community. Thus literature and culture are inseparable" (Kramsch 1992, p. 175).
2. Literature is 'genuine' or 'authentic' material. Works of literature are usually not written for the specific purpose of teaching a language and are intended for native speakers. They can be an important supplement to other types of 'authentic' course materials like cartoons, city maps, timetables, and advertisements (Collie and Slater 1987).
3. Literary texts can serve as an example of certain types of language patterns and structures (like vocabulary usage and syntax). Literature also "provides a rich context in which individual lexical or syntactical items are made more memorable. Reading a substantial and contextual body of text, students gain familiarity with many features of the written language – the formation and function of sentences, the varieties of possible structures, the different ways of connecting ideas...a literary text can serve as an excellent prompt for oral work (Collie and Slater 1987, p. 5; see also McKay, 1986; Littlewood 1986).
4. It can provide personal enjoyment to students, establishing an emotional and aesthetic connection between readers and the text, and helping to contribute to personal growth (Maley 2001; McKay 1986; Kramsch 1992).
5. Selected texts, if interesting to students, can motivate them to read additional literature, thus increasing their reading proficiency (McKay 1986; Krashen 2004).

Advantages to Teaching Translated First Language Literature

One excellent but frequently overlooked type of literature is the translated first language literature of the student. This source has several advantages over the types of literature normally employed by language teachers:

- Students are able to understand the cultural background of the material used, a major stumbling block to using second language literature.
- Characters, theme, plot, values, attitudes, judgments, and much of the vocabulary is recognizable (and hence less psychologically threatening) if students know the original (Day and Bamford, 1998).
- Second language acquisition research has shown that material originating from student's first language's culture greatly

- increases comprehension and retention of a second language. Studies have revealed that simply changing the names of places and characters into more familiar ones increases comprehension (for example, changing English names into Japanese for Japanese EFL students), and changing a few lexical items (places, actions) with more familiar Japanese words or actions resulted in higher cloze scores (Oller 2004; Chihara, Sakurai, and Oller, 1989). In another study, it was discovered "that the cultural origin of folktales for Iranian EFL students had a greater effect on their comprehension than did the level of the syntactic and semantic complexity of the text. That is, Iranians performed better on the texts adapted in English from their native culture than on a text from American culture (Floyd and Carroll, 1987, pp. 90-91).
- It has also been demonstrated that "implicit cultural knowledge presupposed by a text and the reader's own cultural background knowledge interact to make texts based on one's own culture easier to read and understand than syntactically and rhetorically equivalent texts based on less familiar, more distant cultures (Floyd and Carroll, 1987, p. 90). When students from India and the U.S. were told to read letters about an Indian and American wedding, the subjects read letters from their own culture faster, and were able to recall them better than when they read foreign excerpts (Floyd and Carroll 1987).
 - The linguist Stephen Krashen, in numerous writings on the central importance of reading in learning a language, has stated that the ability to read well in the first language is transferable to the second, even when the writing systems are different (Krashen 2004). Consequently, the study of first language literature that has been translated into the second language can also help serve as a 'bridge' between the first and second language.

Practical Classroom Implications

First language literature used in the second language classroom should have the following characteristics: obviously it should be well known to the students, the translation must be faithful to the original, and it should be accessible, not too long, and tailored to the level of the students.

For the last three years, I have used selections translated in English from the famous 18th-century Chinese novel *Honglou meng (Dream of the Red Chamber)* by Cao Xueqin, as literature in several types of undergraduate English courses in China. First published in 1791, this novel is widely considered to be one of the greatest works of traditional Chinese literature. As one Western scholar on the work has concisely noted, to "appreciate its position in Chinese culture, we must imagine a work with the critical cachet of James Joyce's *Ulysses* with the popular appeal of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* – and twice as long as the two combined" (Levy 1999, p. 1). Therefore, all of my students were quite familiar with the novel. Another factor that aided in this familiarity was the extremely popular 1987 television series based on the novel that was shown in China and has been replayed often. According to surveys I conducted in class gauging students' knowledge of the novel, all who have not read the work had seen the television series.

Two complete and well-received translations of *Dream of the Red Chamber* exist in English. One of these translations (by Hsien-yi Yang and Gladys Yang, see Cao 1978) is widely available in China, so there was no problem with accessibility. All of my students were third-year undergraduate English majors, so the translated text generally posed no difficulties.

Maley (2001) has observed that literature based activities in the classroom usually "fall into one of two categories: those that focus on the linguistic analysis of the text, and those in which the text acts as a springboard for a variety of language activities, including discussion and writing" (p. 183). The activities I have employed in China relate to the second category. I have used selections from *Dream of the Red Chamber* in three classes in the following ways:

- **Debate:** Throughout the term, I occasionally assign characters or themes in the novel as debate topics. For example, 'Is Jia Bao-yu (the novel's protagonist) ultimately a good person?' or 'In today's China, is Lin Dai-yu (the novel's heroine) a good role model?' Debating these topics forces students to go to the library, find an English translation of the novel, and conduct research. It also necessitates them take existing background cultural and textual information (plots, names, characters, and situations) and quickly put them to use in a highly structured but fluid English speaking environment (a formal debate).
- **Writing:** When I teach 3rd year writing, I require students to work in groups of five and write and perform a short play. The general subject matter is provided, and students are allowed a large amount of latitude in how they treat the topic. In the past, I have given them a translated section from a (usually well-known) scene from *Dream of the Red Chamber* and ask them to further develop it. I inform them that their product can be satirical or serious, but it cannot

simply recreate the action that takes place in the novel. This technique involves two student-centered activities: role playing (everyone must have a part in the final production) and writing (one week after the play is performed, the script must be handed in).

- **Western Culture:** I have also employed several techniques of cultural comparison in teaching this course. Like many works of traditional Chinese literature, *Dream of the Red Chamber* has many proverbs (110). I take the most interesting of them and present their English translations in class, I next ask students to explain the meaning of the selected proverbs and then provide English proverbs that have comparable meanings.

Because *Dream of the Red Chamber* is on one level a vast cultural compendium, or encyclopedic narrative, that covers diverse topics ranging from culinary arts, medicine, social organizations, gender issues, family relationships to festivals, economics, art, politics, and architecture in detail, the novel brilliantly lends itself to being a platform for comparatively analyzing a variety of subjects. This can be done by giving supplemental handouts to be read in tandem when subjects like Western family life, holidays, and religious practices are taught. For example, when we have completed the section in our textbook entitled 'Education in the United States,' I hand out passages from the novel dealing with educational practices and then we discuss differing Chinese and American cultural assumptions regarding student life, classroom learning and philosophy, as well as how Chinese ideas regarding education have changed (and remained the same) since the 18th century.

Clearly, first language literature can be used in a variety of ways in the English language classroom, depending of course upon the English level of the students and the subject taught. At best, it generates interactive language work that is both meaningful and interesting. Because the first language literature selected is an important part of students' cultural heritage, they have strong opinions about it and often are not afraid to share them.

Once students have become comfortable with reading translated literature, and have been provided with the requisite cultural background, they can then move on to reading and discussing second language literature.

Conclusion

The use of translated first language literature in the second language classroom circumvents several traditional problems associated with employing L2 literature (like differing cultural and world knowledge) while retaining much of the original value of teaching it. To properly use translated first language literature, EFL teachers need to do careful and extensive research regarding what text to employ and which English translation is the best. For if the material is not prudently chosen, and the students are not familiar with it or the translation is not appropriate, using it could mean lost pedagogical opportunities.

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